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Portrait of Danjuro, an Actor
Color print designed by Shunkō

Late Eighteenth Century



*Color print designed by Komatsuken
Late Eighteenth Century*

An Introduction to the Special Exhibition of Japanese Art of the Ukiyo-e School

PRIOR to the seventeenth century the artists of Japan had drawn little, if any, of their inspiration from the phenomena of every-day life among the average people, — phenomena with which each in his time must have been familiar, either as participant or as observer. Apart, indeed, from the type of exaggerated but clever and somewhat broad caricature originated during the latter part of the twelfth century by Toba Sojo, any reference whatever, in painting, to the doings and surroundings of the Japanese themselves had been almost wholly confined to pictures executed by the followers of a single romantic school, known since the thirteenth century as the Tosa Academy.

The humorous style invented by Toba Sojo did not, however, assume the proportions of a distinct school of painting. It persisted, rather, as an easy and effective method of expression for any one, — with or without academic affiliations, — who wished to relieve himself and amuse others by indulging in satire of a fairly obvious kind. The Tosas, on the other hand, — as well as their lineal predecessors, the Takumas and Kasugas, — were entirely serious persons, many of them deeply inspired, and all alike devoted to the maintenance of the ancient and refined traditions of their Academy. In the beginning they contributed more especially, perhaps, to the enrichment of Buddhist art, but from the earliest times, too, they had found inspiration in subjects which were essentially Japanese. Thus the pomp



*Color print designed by Harunobu
Late Eighteenth Century*

and circumstance of the Imperial Court, the lives of great nobles, priests, poets and heroes of romance, the building and contents of some famous temple, — all seem to have furnished suitable motives to these exponents of the Tosa School.

Very different, in this latter respect at least, was the point of view which found such vigorous expression in the early fifteenth century. Up to this time Tosa Romanticism had flourished so exceedingly as almost to obliterate the first impressions received many hundreds of years earlier from China; but already during the later decades of the fourteenth century the powerful influence of a revival of Chinese Idealism began to take effect on the religious, artistic and social activities of Japan. Chinese ideals, as exemplified in the paintings of T'ang, Sung and Yuen masters, were fostered throughout the fifteenth century by such Japanese artists as Josetsu, Shubun, Sotan and Sesshu, to whom Chinese subjects furnished practically their only sources of inspiration, and about 1500 the movement partially culminated in the foundation of the great Kano Academy with Masanobu and his famous son, Motonobu, at its head.

It was nevertheless impossible that the vigorous popular life of Japan should be forever excluded from its place in Japanese art, and it is, therefore, hardly surprising to find evidences that, even in the late sixteenth century and among the Kanos themselves, the canons of Chinese taste were less rigidly enforced against all things Japanese. Still less surprising is it, however, that to a follower of the ancient Tosas, Iwasa Shoi, — more commonly known as Matahei, — should have fallen the lot of

originating, early in the seventeenth century, a true Popular School of Art, founded on his brilliant pictures of life in the streets of Edo and in the far-famed Yoshiwara, among actors and courtesans, and among those, too, who found their happiness under the blossoming cherry trees. His paintings, now excessively rare, were called *Ukiyo-é*,—"pictures of this fleeting world,"—and he had a number of immediate followers; but though his work was of inestimable value to the cause of popular art, bringing in its wake many notable defections from the ranks of the Tosa and Kano Academies, one element of complete success was still lacking. A popular art had, indeed, been evolved, but it remained for Hishikawa Moronobu, a pattern designer, to put this art within the reach of every one by perfecting the crude methods of wood-block engraving already in use for the production of printed picture-books. This important achievement in the history of Japanese art and in the practice of xylography probably took place early in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, and served to establish the *Ukiyo-é* School on a firm foundation. But although during the next two hundred years innumerable myriads of the now familiar color prints were published, many of their prolific designers nevertheless found time for the production of elaborate and carefully executed paintings, while other artists of the School never drew for the publishers at all. Others, again,

devoted their talents to the carving of wood and ivory, or to the working of metals, for various useful and ornamental purposes; and in addition there was a steady output of designs for the use of lacquerers, weavers and pattern makers in general. It followed naturally enough that as all available materials became for these men suitable media of expression, and as their product came to be ever more cheaply and rapidly supplied in response to increasing demands, so, too, were they impelled to employ every possible device of execution and to draw upon every possible source of inspiration. No subject was too sacred or too profane for their purposes. Buddhist divinities, Taoist immortals, saints, grave philosophers and heroes, the whole stock in trade of the aristocratic Tosas and of the Kano idealists,—motives which Sesshu had approached on his knees and painted while he knelt,—all these, together with the gay spectacle of modern life, the clever artists of the Popular School appropriated as their own; and into all they infused the pungent, facile spirit of the *Ukiyo*. So throughout the eighteenth century and until the middle of the nineteenth they worked and prospered, more or less despised, indeed, by the Academicians, but always popular with the mass of the people. However, after the death of Hokusai in 1849, the vigor of the movement flagged; the skill of the artisan, it is true, still survives, but the inspiration of the artist has vanished.



*Inside of a Saké Cup, decorated with lacquer and mitsuda
Middle Eighteenth Century*

*Gold Lacquer Inrō**Early Eighteenth Century*

A review of all that the school accomplished discloses much that may well excite sincere and lasting admiration. Masterly draughtsmanship which juggled, seemingly at will, with almost every subtlety of line and composition; salient and often delicate perceptions of color, keen observation of all phases of life, and endless imaginative good humor in depicting them,—such qualities, combined with tireless energy and great mechanical skill, have justly sufficed to give the Ukiyo-é an important place in Japanese art. On the other hand, it is clear that the purely artistic achievement of Matahei, at the

outset of the seventeenth century, was never surpassed, however much the scope of his teachings may have been amplified, and that what really made the school march was the invention of block printing. In other words, the attempt to make art popular ended, as such attempts invariably do, in popularizing art; the consciousness of the Ukiyo was elevated comparatively little, while the ideals of art were dragged down to the spiritual level of the Yoshiwara.

Truth is the skin of a Lie;
A Lie is the bone of Truth.
To those who lose themselves,
Lies become Truths;
To those who attain Illumination,
Truths are but Lies.
O Yoshiwara! O Middle Path!
Good is the Yoshiwara for the Lost!
Good is the Yoshiwara for the Illumined!
The fidelity and fickleness of its dwellers are deep as
the sea,—
Innumerable as the gay customers who, like the
sands, shift on its shore.*

The objects shown in the present Special Exhibition have been selected from among the Museum's possessions, with the purpose of illustrating the progress of the Ukiyo-é School from its beginning down to the latter part of the nineteenth century, with examples—some of which are reproduced with this article—of paintings, color prints and many specimens of lacquer and metal work, together with carvings in wood and ivory. It is hoped that in this way visitors to the Museum may be able to form a fairly adequate conception of what was achieved by the School of Japanese art which, in the Western world at least, is better known and liked than any other.

J. E. L.

* After a poem by Yomono Akara, another name of Shokusanjin (Ota Nampo), a noted poet of the late eighteenth century.



One of the Thirty-six Views of Fuji Mountain
Color print designed by Hokusai

1760-1849